

Roger Lipsey

PHILIP TAAFFE: CELEBRATIONS

In mid-20th-century literature, there are two imagined places at great distances from where we live but instructive to this day. The first is Hermann Hesse's *Castalia*, the 'Pedagogic Province' where an ascetic Order of intellectuals—musicians, mathematicians, scholars of all things—gathers to learn, practice, and preserve *The Glass Bead Game*. The second is René Daumal's *Port O' Monkeys*, a seaport at the base of Mount Analogue to which fearless voyagers of all times and places have gained access through keen navigation, acrobatically symbolic thinking, dogged patience, and sheer luck.

Hesse's hero, the Magister Ludi Joseph Knecht, becomes the greatest expert and guarantor of the sheltered world of the *Glass Bead Game*, in which all classes of knowledge are deftly combined and permuted in ceremonial public Games, breathlessly witnessed by other adepts and novices. Yet this Master of the Game ultimately recognises that he must abandon *Castalia* to work in the world at large as a humble teacher of the young. His journey, from apprenticeship to mastery of the Game to withdrawal from the Order, offers one of the great imaginative and spiritual experiences of modern literature.

Daumal's hero, or rather group of heroes and stumblers, has a different mission. Setting off by ship under the direction of Father Sogol—best described as an intellectual samurai—to discover and scale Mount Analogue, they break through to a hidden world somewhere in the vastness of the Pacific, provision at Port O'Monkeys for the arduous climb ahead, hire porters who know at least the lower slopes, learn something of the flora and fauna of the Mountain, and begin their ascent. Whereupon, sadly, this great short novel breaks off unfinished at the time of the author's early death. For Father Sogol and his companions, the beginning of the journey

was encyclopaedic knowledge—he had a room in his flat in which virtually all knowledge, inscribed on little cards, was suspended from the ceiling on strings. One walked around in it as if in a park. But the end of the journey was another sort of knowledge, initiatory and transforming, for which strings and cards could not be adequate vehicles.

These two men, the Magister Ludi and Père Sogol, and these two places, Castalia and Mount Analogue, come to mind as keys toward understanding the art of Philip Taaffe. Taaffe's spacious New York studio could easily be taken for an urban annex of the Castalian Order, perhaps part of its outreach programme. And Taaffe himself, moving restlessly through it, pausing to advise an assistant who may be cutting a template or preparing a silk screen, climbing a ladder to consult an antique book on a high shelf, returning to his own work without visibly breaking concentration, is not wholly unlike Hesse's man.

RATIONAL EXUBERANCE, APPRECIATION

The essence of Philip Taaffe's art today is rational exuberance and appreciation. Whatever else Taaffe may convey in a canvas, he is celebrating that things are in the way they are and that we are here to know them—celebrating the technical means and expressive possibilities of art, celebrating the vitality of all things in the world and in our imaginations, celebrating the mind that probes and knows, the hand that can craft the icon of things. This is a grateful art; he is a grateful artist.

I do not know whether appreciation and gratitude are Taaffe's considered answer to the prevailing culture of irony and critical distance in the visual arts and in art theory. I doubt it—there is no trace of combat here, of positions asserted and defended. Taaffe's art seems a naturally loving response to the beauty and authority of life itself and the transformative powers of the imagination. In the language of William Blake and of Nietzsche after him, this art is prolific not devouring, overflowing not mean and self-preoccupied. Ferns come first. Insects come first. Fish come first. Artists are here to facilitate contact and contemplation. Taaffe signs the back of the canvas.

Taaffe's art is signed throughout by a quality of rational exuberance—a carefully elaborated affirmation of colour, form, and space, of decorative

possibilities, of thematic complexity reflecting the complexity of life itself and the resources of imagination. Yet all this richness—the French term is still best—is rigorously designed, meticulously crafted, and nourished by studies in zoology, art history, and other fields, not least the history of scientific illustration. In this weave of sustained disciplines lies the rationality of Taaffe’s art.



Phasmidae (2002)
Mixed media on canvas.
55-3/4 x 69-1/2 inches (142 x 177 cm)

PHASMIDAE: A READING

There is a standard discussion in courses on the history of art concerning the hieratic sizing of divine and human figures in Byzantine art. In simplest terms, the holy figures are larger, the mundane figures smaller. The system worked well for centuries and to this day. What do we discover in Taaffe’s painting *Phasmidae*, where an appealing insect species—”walking sticks”—is depicted as similar in size to the ferns with which it shares the canvas? It is easy to say something of this kind: “Don’t get upset about that—obviously the artist is sharing with us his delight in the formal contrast between the rounded, leafy ferns and the linear, brittle insects. Delight is all that’s needed, particularly when the painting works so well in those terms.” Point well taken, but not quite enough to send us back to our tent. There is something more in this painting. What?

It has to do with knowledge and, more specifically, the act of knowing. In the mind’s eye, ferns and insects have precisely the same size. One thinks about them, examines their structures, and so on—and as one does that, they have no size or the same size. In the Glass Bead Game, all things are restated in a common code so that their relations can be grasped and shown.

And then, how does God see ferns and insects? In reality, who could possibly know? But traditional religious sources offer a wise intuition. God must see them objectively, not preferring the one or the other for its size, colour, or any other attribute. He must see them with that quality of mind the ancient Indian seers called *samata*: sameness.

This may be farfetched. Yet the viewer has a choice, to be freely made. Either the artist is sharing with us his delight in the formal contrast between the shapes of ferns and bugs, or he is offering us something like a divine view of Creation: each living thing clear and whole.

I think it's both. There is no compelling need to choose between alternatives that exclude each other. The only compelling need is to enjoy and understand, to allow the art to affect us enough that we enter into dialogue with it.

CRAFT

I do not think that Taaffe today is arguing with the art around him or with other artists; he has found his own voice and way, and follows where they lead. His debts to the art and artists of recent generations have been fully paid in the currency that matters: deep assimilation of the models and their meaning, the elaboration of an individual art that uses and extends the shared language to state new things.

But there are nonetheless axioms in his practice, and some of them, though surely not intended as such, have the impact of critiques of much contemporary practice. One such concerns craft—the material and, on occasion, athletic processes through which the image on canvas is elaborated. The painting, for Taaffe, is a rigorously crafted object. Even when some of the visual effects wanted are by nature improvisational, freely brushed or otherwise applied, and open to chance occurrences, the mind and hand marshalling these effects are disciplined. Taaffe does not pass from concept to finished work by the shortest route or path of least resistance. A canvas is more likely to emerge along the path of most resistance, elaborated over time, assembled through multiple processes and stages, each requiring deftness. The old, honoured word is *métier*. Artists who command their *métier* are interesting. There is no formal guild today for painting or any art (although academies and university departments occupy some of that terrain), and no test but that of public and critical approval. Yet artists who have successfully toiled to acquire *métier* have met a very real test internal to their art and tradition. In return, they often possess a quality of earned assurance.

Athletics come to mind because one of Taaffe's processes, documented in a short film by Ari Marcopoulos, resembles a pounding Native American dance. For certain works, the artist prepares one or more stencil-like templates, typically quite elaborate in their openwork design. He then spreads a canvas on the floor, applies paint to the template, sets it in place on the canvas, and stamps on it with Native vigour until the impression is transferred as wished to the canvas.



Sanctuary (2002)
Mixed media on linen.
87 x 118-3/4 inches (221 x 302 cm)

Speaking of this practice, colourful and most likely unique, Taaffe doesn't make much of it—it is simply one process among many that the canvas needs to come to life. These paintings are palimpsests, multi-layered images in which ensuing layers partially efface yet integrate with prior layers. The initial layer is likely to be stained into the canvas, in a process reminiscent of Mark Rothko, or textured by a collage of paper “wipe sheets” left over after cleaning tools. The next layer is likely to involve the application of imagery by means of silk screens. The next in turn may be stamped onto the canvas using templates, as described. A layer of collage elements may follow—for example, the “walking stick” insects in one of the canvases in this exhibition began life as separate silk-screened images applied to membrane-like Japanese paper and later integrated into the composition. Upon all this there may well be a final round of direct brushwork. At every stage everything is permissible, provided that it brings the image visually to life and serves the governing concept.

There is a current of steady learning and reinvention in Taaffe's practice. Art is almost always a discomfort, an uneasiness, hope and despair, effort and doubt. Craft offers reliability, comfort, a way of doing things that makes sense. Taaffe's craft is the foundation of his art.

SANCTUARY: A READING

At one level this painting is an entertainment: a sort of archaic aquarium with cheerful fish and birds and sea creatures and long-necked enquirers and rather shamanic or priestly-looking human figures floating by or suspended in superb tranquillity. It offers a serene, enfolding pictorial world where one would be quite happy to float for a while with everyone else in the picture—and imaginatively this is the very experience Taaffe offers us. We can nibble on the greenery, look for a creature a little like ourselves, and generally have a good time until it's time to go.

These rather child-like responses signal that we are in the imaginative and pictorial world of the archaic and primitive, which 20th-century art cultivated with such intelligence and sensitivity. It is a world that Paul Klee knew and cultivated; so too the Surrealists and some American mid-century masters before they distanced themselves from their European teachers and embarked on Abstract Expressionism. Taaffe shows us here the continuing vitality of that tradition; it still speaks to us directly. From the

very beginning (call it Paris and Munich, ca. 1910), this trend in art has offered an experience other than our industrial, urban world—other than what Winston Churchill used to call the “clank and clatter” of modern life. And in terms of the inner landscape, it has offered explorations, attuned to psychoanalytic and Jungian thought, of the ancient, living, though hidden layers of our common human identity.

KNOWLEDGE

Like Paul Klee, whom he admires, Taaffe is a respectful student of previous accomplishments in art and of what used to be called Natural History. In Taaffe as in Klee there is a longing to know—to know the names and forms of all creatures large and small, all plants large and small, all periods and trends in art and architectural decoration, and much else. It is a connoisseur’s interest in the neglected, the marginal, the spurned, the remote, the strange, but also the common: diatoms, ferns, crawfish, snakes, creatures from the ocean depths, early Buddhist decorative carving, Islamic interlace designs, Peruvian petroglyphic signs. This hungry curiosity generates, in Taaffe as in Klee, an enormous variety of themes and motifs: do not look in either artist for a single icon, a “signature piece.” Each piece bears the signature, and each is prelude to the next, which is likely to be very different. Like Klee, Taaffe develops works in parallel rather than in sequence. Klee’s Bauhaus studio contained a crowd of easels and a crowd of works in progress. So too Taaffe’s studio where, during a recent visit, the painting of gemstones, not quite finished, was near the painting of petroglyphs, not quite finished, and close enough to the large painting now called “Ceremonial Frieze,” also on the point of being finished.

A collector of antiquarian illustrated books of Natural History and of compendia of varied images from the natural world and worlds of ancient and exotic art, Taaffe has a centripetal mind: it swirls things in toward his imagination and ultimately toward the canvas. And so he can play with intent expertise the *Glasperlenspiel*, the Glass Bead Game that Hesse imagined so vividly, yet without revealing its full set of rules or very much of its physical appearance. The Game, wrote Hesse, is “the quintessence of intellectuality and art, the sublime cult, the *unio mystica* of all separate members of the *Universitas Litterarium*.... After each symbol conjured up by the director of a Game, each player was required to perform silent, formal meditation on the content, origin, and meaning of this symbol, to call to mind inten-

sively and organically its full purport.... We would scarcely be exaggerating if we ventured to say that for the small circle of genuine Glass Bead Game players the Game was virtually equivalent to worship, although it deliberately eschewed developing any theology of its own.”⁽¹⁾

In Taaffe’s practice, the Glass Bead Game evolves from a many-layered mind and the layering techniques of his craft. As in the imagined Game, there is considerable complexity but also an easily detected order, often based on decorative principles of pattern and repetition. A single painting may bring together in an exuberantly colourful pattern, a set of signs from the natural world, traces of early scientific illustration, an atmosphere that draws on lessons from Impressionism to Rauschenberg, a delight in pattern that renews the fascinations of Gustav Klimt, and more still. Sophisticated—yet the paintings are acts of innocence despite their multiple kinships and complex design. Why this is so is difficult to say. It must be the qualities of belief and celebration. You would find these paintings only in a world the artist has embraced. If the Glass Bead Game, in Hesse’s imagining, is somewhat dry though passionately pursued, then Taaffe’s version of it differs. The intellectuality is there, but so too is love.

DECORATION

More than once in earlier pages the word “decoration” has slipped in, shyly disguised as an adjective, fearful of disdain, yet demanding a place. What is decoration? For people who think about art, the question is more current and intriguing than one might imagine. Not surprisingly, a recent anthology offers a range of answers rather than a single aphoristic solution.⁽²⁾ For present purposes we need an understanding, closer to Louis Sullivan or Josef Hoffmann than to Palladio, that speaks to the ordered lyricism of Taaffe’s canvases. Perhaps we need only recall that decoration has to do with taste, craft, tradition, invention, even sensuality, and of course pattern-making. It intends to beguile, to delight, to animate. It is the least gloomy of arts and rarely has pedagogic intent. Because it can provide a clear order among varied motifs, in Taaffe’s art decorative patterning serves primarily as an armature for the presentation of imagery.

But there is something more. The decorative qualities of Taaffe’s art are an exuberant homage to life itself, to the powers of art and the imagination. We are offered things never seen before, things drawn from distant pasts,

energetically woven as in a textile or tessellated as in mosaic. Matisse had this interest; decoration never apologises for its presence in his art, and it often opens a kind of breadth. His decorated zones create Eden, a place of rest and pleasure. For Matisse, decoration was an attribute of well-being. For Taaffe, it is a structuring tool that allows him to praise the richness of things.



Ceremonial Frieze (2001-02)
Mixed media on linen.
73-1/2 x 160 inches (187 x 406 cm)

CEREMONIAL FRIEZE: A READING

This is a work of spectacular *éclat* and appeal, concerning which metaphors may pour into one's mind. It is like a stained glass window from a sanctuary in Asia where a master from Chartres once took refuge.

Well, that metaphor won't do—too farfetched.

It is like a fin-de-siècle Viennese wall painting, perhaps from a Wittgenstein home never opened to the public or to the recording eyes of art historians. Better—but still farfetched. Yet the canvas touches on these things; they tell us something of its nature.

If metaphor is insufficient, then simple attention may open the image. The eye soon records that the painting is a weave of vertical and horizontal motion, of motion in depth and on the plane of the canvas. Flames licking thickly from the lower edge of the canvas, thinning toward the middle, and acquiring separate presence toward the upper edge reinterpret the flame-like pattern in six openwork panels, which confer on the canvas its frieze-like structure. In early Japanese Buddhist sculpture, a mandorla or elaborate halo surrounded and conveyed the magical dignity of the Buddha; that is the likely source of the panels, although we do not need to know this to experience them fully as stable, hieratic elements set against motion and atmosphere.

The image rises before us with the strength and burst, but also the fragility of a vision. Not heavily painted but rather airy and breathing, it asserts itself ambiguously as a real object and as the record of a dream. The bands of surface patterning set it apart from our own space and seal it into its own, as if it were a masque, a ceremonial theatre.

Does it “mean”? And if so, what does it mean? Do not ask the artist—this is our responsibility. But by putting this question to ourselves, we can authenticate our experience of the painting. There is no definitive answer, though there can be a definitive experience: sustained engagement with the image. No hunger, thirst, desire, or envy—not just now. In their place, just the image. The act of attention is a small askesis, an exercise.

“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.” Is the encounter of Moses with the Burning Bush only another metaphor for this image, as farfetched as those with which we began? Of course—but perhaps closer still to the reality of what is offered here. The painting is a burst of image-making energy, of pictorial exuberance, but it is something more, and that something more is its quiet guarantee. This work is finally about the integration of hieratic stillness and tumultuous energies into a living whole. It is beautiful, not a lesson but a vision.

BETWEEN CASTALIA AND MOUNT ANALOGUE

Once a Castalian, surely always a Castalian, even if one leaves the remoteness of the Pedagogic Province to find work in the world. The joy of knowledge is inextinguishable and, because knowledge has no boundary, the joy of knowing is also without boundary. All this must be vivid for artists who care deeply for knowledge and who create from their mind, skill, and imagination new experiences that enrich the lives of many others. Is this not enough?

Very nearly, but there is something more. Paul Klee put it into words with more eloquence and pain than any. The lines from his “Schöpferische Konfession,” dating to 1920, begin with what may well seem a summary of Taaffe’s compositional procedures, and move on from there: “The shaking free of the elements, their grouping into complex subdivisions, the dismemberment of the object and its reconstruction into a whole, the pictorial polyphony, the achievement of stability through an equilibrium of movement, all these are difficult questions of form, crucial for formal wisdom, but not yet art in the highest circle. In the highest circle an ultimate secret lurks behind the multiplicity of meaning, and the wretched light of the intellect is of no avail”. Art plays an unknowing game with ultimate things, and yet attains them!”⁽³⁾

Klee speaks here the language of Mount Analogue. For this reason, commentary would be betrayal: he asks us to feel his theme and to draw felt conclusions—to stay close to the “highest circle” rather than spin centrifugally away. If we cannot or must not speak, what then?

There is a clue in one of the works on exhibition, *Rose Nocturne*. Toward the beginning of his career, in the mid-1980s, Taaffe paid homage to the British artist, Bridget Riley, by appropriating for canvases of his own her celebrated “Op Art” design of closely parallel, flowing ribbons, which generate both a sense of space and a degree of optical motion—the eye cannot quite still the image. Over the years, this design has accompanied him; here it is again, in the year 2002. But it is changed. Once a tour de force of surface design, the borrowed element is now a half-open façade through which glimmer warm patches of light and colour. Taaffe puts before us a dialogue between front and back, surface and depth, the wholly visible and the half-seen, the systematically engineered and something wholly other—enigmatic lights afloat in darkness.

What is there? Who is there? Are we close to the highest circle, or is it farther on? *Die Kunst spielt mit dem letzten Dingen ein unwissend Spiel.*

FOOTNOTES:

1. Hermann Hesse, *The Glass Bead Game*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1969, pp. 37-38, 41
2. Isabelle Frank, ed., *The Theory of Decorative Art: An Anthology of European & American Writings*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000
3. Translation, with slight alterations, from Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1971, p. 186. The original text reads: “Die Freimachung der Elemente, ihre Gruppierung zu zusammengesetzten Unterabteilungen, die Zergliederung und der Wiederaufbau zum Ganzen auf mehreren Seiten zugleich, die bildnerische Polyphonie, die Herstellung der Ruhe durch Bewegungsausgleich, all dies sind hohe Formfragen, ausschlaggebend für die formale Weisheit, aber noch nicht Kunst im obersten Kreis. Im obersten Kreis steht hinter der Vieldeutigkeit ein letztes Geheimnis und das Licht des Intellekts erlischt kläglich.... Die Kunst spielt mit dem letzten Dingen ein unwissend Spiel und erreicht sie doch!” Paul Klee, *Schriften: Rezensionen und Aufsätze*, ed. Christian Geelhaar, DuMont: Cologne, 1976, p. 122

ROGER LIPSEY, PH.D., is an independent scholar and critic based in Garrison, New York, in the lower Hudson Valley. Author of *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Shambhala: Boston, 1987). He was recently a member of the steering committee for The Buddhism Project, which organized 20 linked exhibitions in the New York metropolitan region of contemporary and ancient art reflecting Buddhist influence.